

3

Tackling difficult issues: lessons from research in Ecuador

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• Introduction

Sociological studies of communities living within or close to areas of exceptional biodiversity play an integral role in any conservation strategy because they can identify impacts to the environment and highlight less harmful means of production. However, such studies are difficult to conduct as they are often perceived by local communities as threatening to their way of life. The need to generate the community's confidence is essential in nurturing co-operation. This involves choosing approaches that facilitate good relations with local communities, even if it means sacrificing the potential of obtaining impeccable data. This article summarises some lessons learnt from a research project in Ecuador.

Project background

Project Eakehei was an international award winning conservation effort that conducted biological and socio-economic studies in and around Podocarpus National Park in southern Ecuador¹. The project had Australian and English scientists working alongside Ecuadorian scientists from a local NGO, Fundacion Arcoiris, which is actively involved in improving the long term management of the park.

In the last 15 years, a massive downturn in Ecuador's economy, combined with rapid

population growth (the highest in Latin America), has resulted in a dramatic increase in the colonisation of Amazon Ecuador. Most colonists are in search of an income from cattle farming and subsequently, the national park has come under increasing pressure from them. In order to understand these pressures, a team spent three months in 1998 working in a 'colonist community', Las Orquideas, in the isolated Rio Nangartiza Valley which borders the eastern edge of the park. The information gained will contribute to a long term management strategy of the area for the Instituto Ecuatoriano Forestal y de Areas Naturales y Vida Silvestre (INEFAN), the national government body responsible for the management of Ecuador's national parks and wildlife. There were two aims of this research:

- to assist Fundacion Arcoiris in understanding the park's biological value; and,
- to assist in understanding the major threats by local communities to the park and surrounding ecosystems.

Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) was used to generate a body of qualitative information on various aspects of the community. It was felt that the qualitative nature of PRA would allow a more in-depth understanding of the complex nature of the community's relations to the surrounding environment.

Generating confidence from the community

The community at Las Orquideas is engaged in a number of illegal activities, most notably illegal selling of wood and hunting endangered species of animals. Over two thirds of the farms cannot afford legal ownership, and are

¹ The project was funded by BirdLife International, the Royal Geographical Society and a number of private sponsors from Latin America, the United Kingdom and Australia.

wary of outsiders being government officials seeking financial obligations. It was therefore very important to overcome community suspicions about the project, particularly in the light of increasing local government pressure on the community concerning their illegitimacy. The first step was to gain the trust of the community. A very effective way of achieving this was by employing a local anthropologist, Eliana Vivanco, who had previously worked and established confidence with a number of residents at Las Orquideas. This link was infinitely important for a number of reasons. First, the fact that Eliana has previously established trust meant that community suspicions toward the project were immediately softened through our association with somebody they already knew and respected. Second, as Eliana was known not to be associated with INEFAN, we were able to distance ourselves from local government officials whom community members approached with suspicion and reticence.

The goodwill established early in the study was maintained by employing a number of local residents to help with the sociological and biological research. The trust gained from the community from their employment and the insights gained from working alongside them improved our understanding of the community and its interactions with the environment, and also provided the opportunity to build networks for future conservation work in the area. To increase the confidence of the community further, community meetings were held on our arrival and throughout our stay. This involved explaining the nature of the research, who we were and the reasons we were interested. Meetings were held frequently to update the community on developments and to allow for feedback. Another important way of getting to know the community was encouraging them to get to know us. This involved spending as much time as possible engaging in community activities such as fishing and preparing meals with various families. It was also very useful showing photos of Australia. This allowed them to place us in a context that was more than just ‘outsiders’.

• Interviewing: overcoming a ‘methodological dilemma’

To gain a more thorough understanding of local resource use, we used semi-structured farm household interviews. However, we initially found that most respondents were nervous and often evasive when discussing issues related to the illegal wood trade, the legal status of their farm and the hunting of local animals. This led to a methodological dilemma: was it worth pushing the interview in order to gain more information, given the discomfort it caused to the respondents? We decided that the best approach was to maintain confidence and trust within the community. When it came to dealing with difficult issues in the interview, we maintained discretion and no priority was given to obtaining impeccable data if it placed a community member in an uncomfortable position.

The reasoning behind our decision was based entirely on attempting to extinguish any sense of threat imposed by the interview situation. A similar situation was summed up by Brand when interviewing Palestinians; *“I sometimes wonder if my questions were at times too benign, if I should have pushed harder for additional information. Perhaps. But I was keenly aware of the value of trust people had placed in me: preserving that trust was ultimately more important than asking for more sensitive information, however it might have strengthened the study”* (Brand, 1988).

Moreover, we found that where community members remained reluctant to answer particular questions, in some instances this reflected broader issues about their understanding of how their activities affected the environment. When discussing the wood trade, for example, respondents were usually happy to provide details on aspects such as market prices, costs, access to markets etc but initially shied away from questions on their own involvement. Similar sentiments were suggested by Ibrahim: *“one can take the field experience as a source of data in itself”* (Ibrahim 1987).

An extra step was taken however to reduce the threat arising from interview questions. We initially conducted a pilot interview with a number of community members and then

made changes resulting from suggestions and comments from respondents. In some instances, changes to the interview questions included unobtrusive measures such as asking “*How do you think most other community members feel...?*” rather than “*How do you feel?*”. This was particularly useful when dealing with issues of the illegal wood trade, as well as hunting. We also found that conducting interviews at respondents' homes, during their daily routines, over meals and beside local football games, maintained a low key environment and therefore allowed respondents to feel relaxed.

By paying attention to minimising any sense of threat from an interview situation, we discovered that it actually became a very effective way of gaining insight into the community's activities. In this sense we would entirely agree with Helen Garners' observation concerning how to approach interviews; “*Interviewing is not what people imagine. Before you try it, you think it must be like pulling teeth. You approach each interview fearing that you will not get enough. But what you learn is that you must humble yourself before the other. You have to let go of your anxious desire to control and direct the encounter. You have to live for a while in the uncertainty of not knowing where it's heading. You don't lead. You learn to follow. And then you are amazed at what people are willing to tell you*” (Garner, 1995).

We discovered that once local residents felt comfortable, they were far from reticent, many insisting that the interview continued beyond the time they had allowed for it in order to ensure that we gained as much valuable information as possible.

• Conclusion

When it comes to discussing difficult issues with local communities, the chances of obtaining a thorough understanding of the issues will increase so long as you have taken as many steps as possible to generate confidence among the community. Through being clear about our intentions and by nurturing community relations, we were able to successfully tackle the difficult issues. Once we had established trust, many local people embraced the opportunity to explain their

circumstances, often bringing up the difficult issues without prompting and in doing so, providing insight into the influences that affect their decisions to engage in activities such as the illegal wood trade and hunting. Consequently, by understanding such influences, we found ourselves in a better position to suggest practical management recommendations.

One example is hunting, where respondents expressed negative perceptions toward local wildlife. This lack of understanding of the importance of the native fauna needs to be addressed. An education programme is desperately needed to change such attitudes and to establish responsibility among local residents. The success of an environmental education strategy will depend on co-ordinating efforts between the community and organisations such as Fundacion Arcoiris and INEFAN. Co-operation. Project Eakehei has helped communicate potential conservation strategies with the residents of Las Orquideas (such as a buffer zone around the park). For this to be successful, the local communities, such as Las Orquideas must be involved in its management along with groups such as INEFAN, Fundacion Arcoiris and local conservation groups. Without local community support, management plans cannot be achieved. Las Orquideas has a community structure which could provide a foundation for planning community involvement in future conservation projects. Therefore the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with Las Orquideas cannot be underestimated if future conservation strategies are to succeed.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

The full project report will be available later on this year. Contact the author for further details.

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